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ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION, SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AND INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

Membership in ethnic groups is salient to positive self-concepts and as a buffer against perceived discrimination. Ethnic identification takes on special importance under conditions of perceived discrimination and identity threat. Our research reported here is based on a survey and partly on semi-directive interviews conducted with 371 respondents between the ages of 18 and 31 in city of Karaganda, the central region of Kazakhstan. Results showed that the Russian and other minorities in Kazakhstan have perceptions of discrimination that varies from the majority. Further, the results indicated that the perceptions of the minorities and majority are partly determined by their asymmetric relationship. Ethnic identity is especially salient to minorities that experience identity threat. It can be concluded that coercive national policies seeking integration is counter-indicated by the results.

Keywords: ethnic identity, discrimination, ethnic groups, minority, research, Kazakhstan, cross-cultural.

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1. Introduction

Ethnic identity is a central concept in developmental, social and cross-cultural psychology. A person's ethnic identity is based on self-categorization which is discussed in group categorization research (e.g. Phinney, 2007). Research has demonstrated that mere membership in groups, even if without identifying meaning, can produce discriminatory behaviors (e.g. Tajfel, 1972). In particular Doise, Csepi, Dann, Gouge, Larsen & Ostell (1972) demonstrated significant in-group bias by subjects placed into nonsensical groups demonstrating the power of minimal group identification. The in-group bias has been demonstrated in a number of studies (Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Monteith, 2001).

It is thought that ethnic identity serves as a buffer between perceived discrimination and negative psychological consequences like depression (Torres & Ong, 2010). The social support experienced in ethnic identity seems to reduce the symptoms of discrimination and resulting stress (Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow & Fuligni, 2006). Further, many studies support the positive outcomes of ethnic identification for the experiencing of happiness and improved mental health (Ortiz & Santos, 2010). This paper will address the role of ethnic identification among the Kazakh majority and the minorities of Kazakhstan and in particular the perceived discrimination experienced by the ethnic groups after the collapse of the USSR.

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Population and the ethnic composition in Kazakhstan

According to the last national census in 2009 16 009 600 people* live in Kazakhstan. The population consists of 10.1 billion Kazakhs (63.1 %) and 3.8 billion Russians (23.7 %). The Russians are the biggest minority community of Kazakhstan and the most important at the political and economic level. All in all, Kazakhstan have a total of 130 ethnic groups including Uzbeks (2.8 %), Ukrainians (2.1 %), Uyghur (1.4 %), Tartars (1.3 %), Germans (1.1 %), and also Byelorussians, Koreans, Poles and the others ethno-cultural groups (together 4.5 %).

Linguistic relativity: from the dominance of Russian to the to the exclusivity of Kazakh language

In Kazakhstan, the Kazakh and Russian languages are both used in communication. Kazakh is the official national language and Russian is recognized as the official language of interethnic communication. The linguistic question in Kazakhstan is at the heart of numerous debates and is considered by the Russians and the other ethnic minorities as having produced discriminatory results favoring the majority (Jumageldinov, 2009; 2010; 2012). According to the President of the Kazakhstani Association of primary school teachers of the Russian schools, 303 schools teaching in Russian language were closed in Kazakhstan between 2006 and 2009 (N. Vdovina, 2008)[†].

Identity and social categorization

Despite efforts of the government to build a common national identity in Kazakhstan, ethnic identity remains a dominant outcome of social categorization. For all citizens the division into "we" and "they" refers to membership in an ethnic group. Social categorization stresses the differences between memberships based on ethnicity that is reflected in their representation of national identity. The theory of the social identity (Tajfel (1972; Turner, 1975) suggested that social categorization is a process of social comparison between groups that allow the individual to maintain or to reach a positive social identity. Tajfel made the connection between identity and social categorization where every individual builds social identity from membership in certain groups and from the associated emotional and evaluative meaning (Rabbie & Horwitz, 1979).

The conflict between ethnic groups in Kazakhstan is primarily caused by the competition between the Kazakhs and the Russians. In this situation, each ethnic group creates its own behavioral models and values. The French psychologist Lipiansky (1990) characterizes ethnic strategy as coordinated group operations and actions to affect a positive self-defined objective. It is a "set of operations" that serve to avoid or reduce anxiety and social depreciation (Malewska-Peyre, 1993).

Objectives of the research

The main objective of our research was to understand the place of national identity in the identity construction of young people belonging to different ethnic groups (Kazakhs, Russians and the other minorities). The study was carried out in the city of Karaganda among young people in interethnic contact.

Methods

Sample characteristics

Our sample was composed of 371 respondents (48.2 % men and 51.8 % women). Participants were high school and college students ranging in age from 15 to 31 years old and surveyed in 2006. The ethnic origin of the sample is as follows: 95 (25.6 %) Kazakh; 186 (50.1 %) Russian; and 90 (24.3 %) representatives of other ethnic minority groups.

Survey

The questionnaire was the main instrument of the investigation in the study. This method allows the application of quantitative analysis useful in big samples. Secondly, survey questions permitted the comparative study between the several ethnic groups of social representations as proposed above. Thirdly, the anonymous character

* *Facts of the national Agency of statistics of Kazakhstan*. www.stat.kz/news/Pages/pr_04_02_10.aspx, Published 4/02/2010.

[†] N Vdovina (2008) *Russkij yazyk v Kazahstane (The Russian language in Kazakhstan)*. Source:<http://nomad.su/?A=14-200809170322>, Published 17/09/2008.

of the survey allowed young people to respond more honestly on sensitive questions related to attitudes toward other ethnic groups and discrimination in society. A sixty-four item questionnaire in the Russian language was developed for the study that included both open-ended and fixed response categories.

The data processing

The analysis of the data was made by the French statistical software “Sphinx Plus²” (version 2003). This program facilitated the statistical analysis of the data from questions with fixed response categories and allowed for graphic representations and (Chi 2) tests. The current paper focuses on the state of interethnic relations in Kazakhstan and the perception of discrimination between the ethnic groups.

The semi-directive interview after survey completion

The semi-directive interview was useful in deepening the interpretation of the results obtained by the questionnaire. In all, 18 semi-directive conversations were obtained with the representatives of 3 ethnic groups: six Kazakhs participants, ten Russian respondents, and two Germans answered both the questionnaire and agreed to the interview. The structure of the interview corresponded to the questionnaire and tackled similar issues. The objective was to adapt the interview to the questionnaire results of each participant in order to enrich the understanding and interpretation of the data. Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview critics of government’s policy of managing interethnic relations since participants with negative views refused to leave contact data for follow-up.

Results and discussion

It was hypothesized that the relationships between the Kazakhs and the Russians are determined by their uneven positions in society. The asymmetric relationships of “dominating/ dominated” are the primary cause of intergroup conflict in Kazakhstan. To examine that issue the following question was asked “In your opinion, what are the present relations between the young people of different ethnic origins in Kazakhstan?”.

Results of the survey showed that the dominant and favored Kazakh ethnic sample perceived interethnic relations in Kazakhstan in more positive terms compared to the Russian and the other ethnic groups. In fact a large plurality (46.3 %) of the Kazakh sample describes the character of interethnic relations as friendly. ($\chi^2 = 23.32$, $df = 16$, $1-p = 89.45\%$).

The Russian and the other ethnic samples were more reserved in their responses and chose “neutral” to describe interethnic relations more frequently. This impression is strengthened as the answer “tense relations” is utilized more by the Russian and the other ethnic groups and both of these categories perceive interethnic relations in more negative terms compared to the Kazakhs. As a further example, in the “other answer” category, the Russian sample asserts that interethnic relations make them victims of “a hidden racial discrimination”.

However, most respondents of all ethnic groups consider interethnic relations in positive or neutral terms. At the same time, the character of relations depends to an important degree on the concrete situation. All ethnic groups recognize that there are problems in the various domains of social life in Kazakhstan. However, each ethnic group has its own representation of these problems. For example, the Kazakhs represent discriminatory behavior as different from the other groups. The answers of the Russians and the other minority ethnic groups suggest that cultural identification of each group determines its perception of ethnic relationships.

The attitudes of respondents toward national identity

An important issue is how the social representations of national identity are present in different ethnic groups. It was hypothesized that Kazakhs, Russian and other ethnic groups have different conceptualizations. It is important to remember that the survey was conducted in Russian as 98% of respondents learned the Russian language and only 2.2% understood Kazakh.

The respondents were asked “Do you agree that ethnic origin should be removed from passport and identification cards?” Please explain your answer. ($\chi^2 = 6.54$, $df = 4$, $1-p = 83.75\%$). While not significant Kazakhs (42.1%) indicated the strongest support for removing ethnic identity from official documents and sought to downplay the significance of ethnic origin. There is obviously less identity threat to an ethnic group that is already in control and in the majority. Russians and the representatives of other groups have a greater desire to preserve ethnicity in passports and in other official documents. However, the 38.9% of Kazakhs who wished to preserve ethnicity is a

substantial minority and that result would suggest that the integration of a common national identity will be a difficult journey for the state.

A content analysis was performed of the open-ended responses to the question. The results showed that for the Kazakh majority patriotism and ethnic identity are inseparable. Therefore as noted above the removal of ethnic origin does not represent a threat to cultural identity since the words “Kazakh” and “Kazakhstani” are synonymous. Removal of ethnic identity will not matter because Kazakhs have the same origin and Kazakhstan is considered the motherland. Kazakhs who agree with the removal of ethnicity from official documents believe that such a move will strengthen feelings of patriotism and will promote the integration and unification of the country. The term Kazakhstani is more unifying and by removing ethnic distinctions all ethnic groups will be more likely to integrate into one nation and the people will be motivated toward achieving a common future. However Russians and other ethnic minorities consider the idea of the removal of ethnic identity in official documents to be a step toward assimilation and therefore a loss of identity.

Perceived discrimination between the ethnic groups

The relationships between ethnic groups in Kazakhstan can be approached by asking about relative equality and discrimination. How do the young people from various ethnic groups see the issue of discrimination as perception of that issue impacts behavior between groups and may be considered an index of interethnic relations. To measure perception of discrimination the following survey question was included: “In your opinion which ethnic group demonstrates the highest level of discrimination?” ($\chi^2 = 40.82$, $df = 12$, $1-p = 99.99\%$). The significant Chi 2 value show that the respondents differed significantly on perceived discrimination based on their ethnic membership. On the question of discrimination generally, the “Kazakhs” answer mostly “do not know” (25 %) and “all groups” (21 %). Among Russian respondents (44.9 %) believe that Kazakhs discriminate more than other ethnic groups, further 19.4 % of the Russians answered “do not know”. The responses of the “other minority” ethnic groups are similar to those of the Russians in most of the cases.

Some conclusions

The results suggest that the importance of ethnic identity is salient for all groups and therefore the integration of the Kazakhstani nation remains an important problem for the country. Ethnic membership is the fundamental social categorization which prevails in the identity construction of individuals in society. For Kazakhs, the ethnic identification is synonymous with national identity. Ethnic membership has an important value in their construction of identity and is considered an object of their pride. To be Kazakh means having a privileged status in Kazakhstan.

As a result of the perceived threats, the feeling of ethnic membership among minorities is strengthened to the detriment of their membership in the nation. Russians and the other ethnic groups elaborate similar strategies of preserving ethnic identity in confronting the construction of the nation state based on Kazakh identity. The interethnic relations in Kazakhstan possess an inherent conflict potential and raises issues about the existence of national unity. Ethnocentric policies are judged by Russians and other minority ethnic groups as discriminatory and stress the ethnic and linguistic differences between the Kazakhs and other ethnic communities that do not favor the integration of the Kazakhstani nation.

The role of the intercultural psychologists in Kazakhstan can be useful and even necessary in the analysis of critical situations on the societal and on the individual level in order to better understand potential conflicts and to look for solutions.

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